

Proposal for Increased Mountain Bike Access in the Town Forest



Molasses, built in 2018 and shown here, is one of three mountain bike trails built and maintained by this group.

Proposal Revised June 14, 2023

(Revised edition; submitted to the Select Board and Stranahan Forest Committee on June 14, 2023. The prior edition was submitted to the same on April 24, 2023.)

Contact Person: Sarah Galbraith, (802) 595-3458 or adventurevt@gmail.com

Part 1: OUR PROPOSAL

Proposal Summary

A local group of mountain bikers and trail builders is requesting permission to add bikes as an allowable use on portions of the following trails in the Stranahan Town Forest: Ravine's Trail, Short Cut, High Ridge Trail, Upper Sugarwoods, and Sugarhouse Loop (see attached map). This addition will create a longer-distance loop that is close to home for people in our community and on public land.

We are not asking to reconstruct the trails, but rather to add bikes to them as is, with some improvements where needed and decided on through a collaborative process with town committees. Our builders and volunteers would be glad to be partners in maintaining the trails going forward.

The intention is not to create a mountain bike destination for tourists, but rather to provide our community residents, including a growing cohort of youth, with an option to ride bikes on trails that are close to home and on public land.

Who We Are

Our group comprises about 40 volunteers, including about 10 paying members, from Marshfield, Plainfield, East Montpelier, and Cabot. We are organized as a 501c3 nonprofit, called Riders in Plainfield and Marshfield (RIPM), and we are incorporated under the umbrella of Vermont Mountain Bike Association (VMBA). VMBA provides training and resources and liability insurance for our volunteers, trail builders, and trail users.

Our lead builders have many years of trail building experience and all have formal training in trail design and construction, including modern safety and sustainability best practices. We build our trails to the widely-accepted standards put forth by the International Mountain Bike Association, as laid out in the trail building guidebook "Trail Solutions: IMBA's Guide to Building Singletrack." We also use the "Vermont Trail Design Guide." Many of us enjoy the aspect of trail design and construction as much as we enjoy riding, and we look forward to deepening our relationship as partners who are supporting the trail system in the town forest.

Our proposal comes from a place of caring about the town forest. We are just like any other user group in the town forest. Mountain bikers enjoy riding our bikes in the woods because we enjoy being in nature. We are no different from other users of the town forest in this regard: we are there to find peace, connection with nature and ourselves, and the experience of being immersed in the forest – it's why we choose to ride our bikes in the woods. We often stop to notice wildlife, plants and trees, or to sit by a babbling stream. We also all use the town forest in a myriad of ways, including running, walking, birding, skiing, foraging, and more, and riding bikes just happens to be one of them. This means we can easily understand and respect the perspectives of other users that we share the trails with.

Historically we have been mis-characterized as people who do not care about the forest. But that is not the truth: Our proposal to add bikes to the town forest comes from a shared desire to honor and protect the beauty, ecological functioning, and importance of this special place. We demonstrate this by being a group who continually gives hundreds of hours to trail maintenance and storm cleanup. More importantly, we are a user group who continually engages in conversation about responsible use of the town forest. Our growing cohort of young builders and riders, including second graders through high school students, means we are simultaneously fostering the next generation of forest and trail stewards as well.

What We're Asking For

We are asking to add mountain bikes as an allowed use on several of the trails in the town forest. This includes portions of: Ravine's Trail, Short Cut, High Ridge Trail, Upper Sugarwoods, and Sugarhouse Loop (see attached map). The recommended access point for these trails would be the Jake Martin Road parking lot, where there is already a kiosk with information for mountain bikers, and from where the existing mountain bike trails are more easily accessed. The mountain bike trails and Moonfield Trail are in excellent condition to provide access to these additional trails, and the population who would ride these additional trails would be skilled enough to handle the challenges of riding on the necessary sections of Thompson Road.

Note that this request is specifically to use an "outer loop" along portions of each of these trails (see map), and not necessarily each of these trails in their entirety. But this does raise management questions. For one, we will need a plan to effectively communicate to users that only portions of each trail are open to bikers; and two, there may need to be an option for riders to bail out of the longer loop, should they have a health or mechanical issue.

As for the trails themselves, we are not asking to reconstruct the trails, nor add any features for bikes, but rather are asking to ride the trails as they are. We are willing to work collaboratively on any minor improvements, including addressing wet areas, sight lines, the addition of bridges, relocations, or other projects. These improvements would be decided on through a collaborative process among our group, the town forest committee, and other parties as needed. As the proposal evolves with public input and group discussion, any updates to the proposal will be made in writing.

Why This Project Matters

The addition of bikes to these trails would provide a longer loop for mountain bikers in our community to ride that is close to home and on public land. A longer loop to ride is appealing to the stronger, more skilled riders in our community who want a more challenging and remote riding experience. Having the option to ride close to home means that mountain bikers in our community would have an alternative to putting their bikes on their cars and driving 20, 40, or 60 minutes to trailheads in other towns, thereby saving time, reducing air pollution and fossil fuel use, and increasing the likelihood that community members will get out into nature for healthy recreation and exercise. Importantly, close-to-home trails provide parents of young riders the opportunity to bring their children to a trail system that is not a long drive away. In fact, in many cases, young riders can even access the trail system on their own by bike. This

proximity to home addresses two primary barriers to getting youth outside: family culture and transportation.

Options for riding on public land are important because community members can easily access information, such as maps, when trails are built on public land. More and more members of our community are asking for in-town options to mountain bike, including families, children ages 8 to 18, and local teachers. Trails on public land, with maps and information made available at kiosks and trailheads, provide a safe and accessible trail experience for *all people* in our community.

Part 2: ADDRESSING CONCERNS

The following sections reflect questions and concerns that have been raised by committee members and members of the public during a recent town forest committee meeting. We are happy to continue to engage in conversation about any concerns that arise throughout this proposal review process.

Demand: How many riders do you anticipate to make use of the new mountain bike trails?

This is a challenging question to answer, and we are wary of being put in a position of monitoring trail use when no other user group is being asked to do the same. With that, we do not anticipate a large increase in trail use; our expectation is that only a few people will ride these trails each week.

While the level of future usage is challenging to predict, we do have an important local data point to consider when addressing this question. Butterfield Trails is a 5-mile trail network in North Montpelier that was built by one of our volunteers. It is on private land, but is a public trail network, with maps available online at TrailForks. The trails are open to all users, but importantly, these trails were purpose-built for mountain bikers and are heavily advertised through social media, word of mouth, and the Vermont Mountain Bike Association community. The owner of the trail system keeps a game camera on the trail system throughout the riding season and regularly counts the number of users; he estimates he sees 12 mountain bikers per week, on average.

The above point of comparison is important because there are a few differences from the town forest, and these point to the likelihood of lower levels of usage. We are not building mountain bike features that would attract lots of riders, and we will not be widely advertising this trail system outside of our community. For these reasons, we do not anticipate a high level of use.

How many members and volunteers does RIPM have?

On average, RIPM has about 10 paying members each year. We have a list of about 40 volunteers who have been working with us since 2015. Our number of volunteers is the most important: our ability to steward trails is far more dependent on the people who give their time.

Provide a detailed map showing where you propose to make changes/improvements to the existing trail.

See Part 3 of this proposal, below.

Provide a draft budget for proposed trail improvements and plan for raising funds.

See Part 3 of this proposal, below.

What are your plans for signage, especially regarding wet trails and rider courtesy?

The kiosk at Jake Martin Road has always included maps and information for mountain bikers.



We have signs listing which trails allow mountain bikes, a sign explaining to yield to horses, a sign explaining good trail etiquette, and contact information for riders who want to join the volunteer effort. We can also post signs about trail closures at this kiosk.

We also communicate about trail use, etiquette, volunteer opportunities, and closures through an email list and social media pages.

We do ask that other user groups consider whether this is necessary for their uses, and why it would be asked of one user group (mountain bikers) and not any others (hikers, dog walkers, horseback riders, VAST). There is the potential for differential treatment to perpetuate the idea that mountain bikers are somehow less welcome or more negative than other user groups, and that is not in line with equitable access. It's also not reality: Again, we are the only user group holding discussion about responsible use.

With that, we would be happy to add signage, as we already have and do, where appropriate, including on the trail system itself, if that is desired.



The kiosk on Jake Martin Road, which is the primary point of access for mountain bikers, includes a map of the bike trails and signage about trail access, trail etiquette, yielding to horses, and volunteer information.

What will be the degree of technicality of trail riding?

The style of these trails in the town forest lends to a type of mountain biking called cross-country riding, which is characterized by long sections of pedaling, challenging climbs, and natural trail surfaces that preserve roots and rocks; it can be called "adventure riding." The physical challenge and natural character of these trails is appealing to riders. The proposed

addition of bikes to these trails is geared toward more experienced riders with strong technical skills, and our community has riders of all ages that fit this description; these would be intermediate and advanced riders. This type of layout is in good alignment with smart trail design that puts beginner friendly trails closer to the parking lot (such as Molasses, Uncle Maple, and Tapline, which are in close proximity to the parking lot and kiosk on Jake Martin Road) and more challenging trails further afield.

Are there any liability concerns?

We do not have any liability concerns. Building our trails to international standards and providing adequate signage are two primary ways to reduce liability, because we can show that all reasonable measures were taken to prevent accident or injury. Any insurance policy that currently covers the town forest should already include protection against liability for volunteers and users, and RIPM/VMBA can provide additional insurance coverage. Our insurance binder has already been provided to the town clerk's office, as per our MOU with the town for the construction of Molasses, Uncle Maple, and Tapline. If needed, we can consult with VMBA to revise the binder.

Please address the following criteria from the Stranahan Town Forest Management Plan:

- Consistency with the easement terms:
 - Mountain bikes are an allowed use included in the conservation easement
 - Trail design and information are the tools used to ensure responsible use and limited impact
- Impacts on the forest's natural and historic resources
 - All user groups have an impact on the surrounding environment, and there are studies pointing at all different angles around this issue, claiming one user group is more impactful than another. You can pick a study and make your case, and we as a group do not feel that we have a significant negative impact. But what feels more important to us, is that we are a user group that has continually demonstrated, since 2015, that we want to be engaged in positive and productive conversations around minimizing any impact. We are happy to continue doing this and view this as a primary part of our role as partners in the town forest.
- Extent to which any impacts will be mitigated
 - (See above) These specific projects will be identified as we continue to evaluate and refine the proposed route with the town forest committee and other partners. As these specifics become more solidified, we can continue to put these details in writing.
- Trail building specifications (extent to which they are up-to-date and sustainable)
 - Our lead builders have many years of trail building experience and all have formal training in trail design and construction, specifically around safety and sustainability standards. We build our trails to the internationally-accepted guidelines put forth by the International Mountain Bike Association, as outlined in the guidebook "Trail Solutions: IMBA's Guide to Building Singletrack." We also use the "Vermont Trail Design Guide." Our lead builders and volunteers are

continually engaged in trail building, volunteer days with groups around the state, and training opportunities, so that we are constantly up to date on best practices.

- Consistency with the Management Plan objectives of the Stranahan Town Forest
 - Fostering a reciprocal relationship with the land (and ourselves): Trails are a window to the natural world (and back onto ourselves), and providing increased access to this user group expands the opportunity for connection to and a reciprocal relationship with the land. This is especially important for the growing cohort of young riders and trail builders who work with us, and who are becoming the next generation of stewards.
 - Protection of natural features: There are numerous sections of the plan that discuss the protection of sensitive communities, water, historical artifacts and features, and other natural features. Our proposal includes best practices for addressing the safety of these features. We ask that these considerations be made by all user groups, not just mountain bikers, as we do not feel that mountain biking poses any additional threat.
 - Community recreation as an asset: Recreational use of the town forest provides an important resource for community health through physical activity and exercise. Allowing increased mountain bike access, and a longer loop that better matches our physical ability, is one way to achieve this.
 - Modern trail design:
 - The plan describes that all new trails will adhere to modern best practices for sustainable trails that minimize erosion and require less maintenance going forward. We build trails to modern standards for safety and sustainability, and as part of this proposal we are offering to partner with the town forest committee to make improvements to the trails that will bring them up to modern standard and improve the recreational experience for all user groups.
 - Our group makes use of the Vermont Trail Design Guide, which includes trail building specifications for mitigating impact (from all users) to a variety of natural communities and natural features. Examples of these specifications include buffers, relocations, or minimizing soil disruption.
 - Public process: We are working with the Town Forest Committee and Select Board to adhere to the process for reviewing proposals for the town forest, as approved in the Stranahan Town Forest Management Plan. This process includes numerous opportunities for public input, and we invite that input, because it makes a better proposal and stronger community partnerships.
- Demonstrated capacity to build, and then steward and maintain, the trail
 - Our proposal includes the role of our group as a partner in trail building and maintenance on these trails.
 - We have been building and maintaining trails in the community, including in the town forest, since 2015. We have several land owners in Marshfield, including Twinfield School, who could provide endorsements for our work.

- We have a list of 40 volunteers who have worked on our trails, from giving a few hours up to several hundred hours.

Part 3: WALKTHROUGH

On June 10, 2023, seventeen people joined a walkthrough of the proposed route, including members of the group making this proposal, members of the town forest committee, members of the conservation commission, two members of the Marshfield select board, and two concerned residents. The key points from that conversation are included here, and a map is attached highlighting the points of concern that were discussed in the field.

Those in attendance were:

- Town forest committee:
 - Nancy Everhart
 - Ellen Cooke
 - Michael Sabourin
 - Patrick Pfeifer
- Conservation commission:
 - Ed Jalbert
 - Annie Reed
 - Bradley Materick
- Select board:
 - Justin Campbell
 - Rich Baker
- General public:
 - Susan Abbott
 - James Arisman
- Mountain bikers/trail builders:
 - Eammon Carlton
 - Brenda Carlton
 - Tristan von Duntz
 - Jeb Wallace-Broder
 - Dan Schall
 - Sarah Galbraith

Map of Our Walked Route:

See the attached map of our walkthrough. The alert symbols with numbers on the map reflect the spots where the group stopped to discuss concerns or potential trail improvements. The numbered list below gives more details on each area of concern and the options to address each that were discussed among those in attendance.

Please note that most, if not all, of these improvements will benefit all user groups, not just mountain bikers, and probably should be considered regardless of whether bikes are added to the trails.

In general, for all improvements that are discussed below, we ask that we avoid mitigating problems that don't yet exist. At this point, many of the considerations presented below are best attempts at predicting the future, and may not turn out to be accurate. One approach, and, overall, our recommended one, is to largely leave the trails as they are. Problem areas will not arise overnight; rather, if they do arise, they will be slow-building and easy to monitor. This means we can easily address problems as they arise, rather than expending a lot of effort to address potential problems that we don't yet have. A plan could be put in place to regularly monitor the trails, so that we can stay ahead of any developing problems. This minimalist/monitoring approach is likely to be the best use of all of our time and resources.

The list below includes the areas of concern discussed on our walk (numbered items on the attached map), and below that, each of the options we discussed to address these concerns. Part of this proposal process, going forward, will be to work collaboratively to select options. As this conversation evolves, the proposal, too, will evolve, and will lead to a formal plan for trail work. With a formal plan, we can put in writing more detailed specifications and budgets for trail work.

Areas of Concern That Were Discussed by the Group on 6/10/23 Walkthrough (shown on attached map):

1. Sap lines: A thick black main line hangs low over the trail in this spot.
 - a. We propose to raise the line here when sugaring season is not in operation. We also will add orange tape that hangs from the line to increase visibility; or
 - b. RIPM already has a strong working relationship with the family that currently holds the contract for sugaring in the town forest. We have an agreement that allows us to raise and lower main lines and secondary lines; we stay in close communication with them about this and close the trails to mountain bikes during sugaring season to avoid conflicts with the lines or other sugaring infrastructure.
2. Steep section: The trail follows a steep fall-line here.
 - a. Leave it as is, and bikers can walk uphill if needed. We can monitor for erosion from downhill traffic, which we expect to be minimal with small numbers of users.
 - b. Add switchbacks.
3. Fall-line downhill: A steeper downhill section that could be susceptible to erosion.
 - a. This can be left as is, and monitored for any increase in erosion. With a small increase in usage, this is unlikely to be a problem.
 - b. Features can be added to redirect water off of the trail bed.
 - c. The topsoil can be removed so that the trail bed is on mineral soil, which sheds water more easily. The impact of removing this soil should be weighed against any impact from potential minor increase in erosion. Again, this can be monitored and addressed at the time it becomes a problem, if it ever does.
4. Stream crossing: What is the best way for bikes to cross?
 - a. This is rideable as is and can be left as is.

- b. Rock work or a small bridge can be added.
 - c. A larger 3- or 4-foot bridge can be added.
- 5. Sight lines: This spot in the trail is narrow, and we stopped to talk about the concern for being able to see other users approaching, and whether a collision could happen here.
 - a. Riders are not likely to be moving at high speed in this area; a collision is very unlikely.
 - b. Sight lines are fairly good in this area. If improvements are requested, we can remove tree limbs to open up the sight lines, but this should be weight against the minimal likelihood of a collision and the aesthetic value of the trail as is.
- 6. Roots: These will be prone to erosion from foot traffic and bikes, over time, and that risks destabilizing the tree. Rocks or soil can be added to buffer the roots from damage from all users.
- 7. Steep grade by stream: This is a fairly steep grade that could be challenging to ride or prone to erosion.
 - a. Leaving it as is; riders who are not able to ride it can walk their bikes.
 - b. Add switchbacks.
- 8. Mill site/waterfall crossing: We discussed how best to cross the stream above the waterfall.
 - a. The crossing can be left as is; bikers can walk or ride across.
 - b. A bridge can be built.
- 9. Wet area: This is a very muddy low area with rich organic soil.
 - a. Educate all users to go through the mud, not around it, to avoid trail widening.
 - b. Armor the trail with rocks.
 - c. Relocate this section of the trail to nearby high and dry ground.
- 10. More wet areas: Similar to the above, this is a perennial muddy spot in a low area with rich organic material.
 - a. Educate all users to go through the mud, not around it, to avoid trail widening.
 - b. Armor the trail with rocks.
 - c. Relocate this section of trail to nearby high and dry ground.
- 11. Sensitive plants: Annie pointed out that there are sensitive plants alongside this section of trail; we will be careful to keep the tread narrow and will not consider any relocations in this area. The trail is already on high and dry ground and in good shape in this spot, so there were no improvements suggested for this spot.
- 12. Thompson Road: This spot will need mowing, weed whacking, or brush hogging. Alternatively, the bike traffic from a few riders each week will help keep the trail clear. We have seen this same result on other grassy trails that we manage.

To address these concerns and select the right management options for each, we propose moving forward in collaboration, both in the field and in public meetings, to evaluate these options.

To answer the two questions from Part 2, above, with this work, we will continue to refine our proposal with specifics for trail improvement projects and any budgets and fundraising plans related to them.

Part 4: CONCLUSION

In summary, a group of dedicated volunteer trail builders is asking to add mountain bikes as an allowed user to several of the existing trails in the town forest. This is in order to meet the growing desire among community members, including families with young riders, for options to ride our bikes that are close to home and on public land.

Our group is offering to be a partner in trail maintenance and monitoring, and to contribute volunteer time and funds to this effort. Our aim is to maintain the existing natural character of these trails, although we are also willing to explore options to address any areas of concern, in order to provide a safe and enjoyable trail experience.

To make this request, we are following the proposal process that is laid out in the town forest management plan and approved by the select board. We look forward to a process of public input and community discussion, and as the proposal evolves, we will continue to provide plans, budgets, and fundraising details in writing as they evolve. We believe this request would provide a more equitable approach to providing an important recreation asset that enhances the health and well-being of our community.

ATTACHMENTS INCLUDED:

1. Map of proposed route in the town forest
2. Map showing areas of concern discussed on 6/10/23 walkthrough